

## Background to English “Fiction - Novel”

**Q. What do you mean by the literary term - “Novel”? Comment on its rise as a potent literary force in English along with a few significant moments from its literary history.**

**Answer:**

The dominant genre in world literature, the novel is actually a relatively young form of imaginative writing. Only about 250 years old in England, its rise to preeminence has been striking. After sparse beginnings in seventeenth-century England, novels grew exponentially in production by the eighteenth century and in the nineteenth century became the primary form of popular entertainment.

Elizabethan literature provides a starting point for identifying prototypes of the novel in England. Although not widespread, works of prose fiction were not uncommon during this period. Possibly the best known was Sir **Philip Sidney's *Arcadia***, a romance published posthumously in 1590. The novel also owes a debt to Elizabethan drama, which was the leading form of popular entertainment in the age of Shakespeare. The first professional novelist—that is, the first person to earn a living from publishing novels—was probably the dramatist **Aphra Behn**. Her 1688 *Oronoko, or The Royal Slave* typified the early English novel: it features a sensationalistic plot that borrowed freely from continental literature, especially from the imported French romance. Concurrent with Behn's career was that of another important early English novelist: **John Bunyan**. This religious author's *Pilgrim's Progress*, first published in 1678, became one of the books found in nearly every English household.

In the second half of the seventeenth century, the novel genre developed many of the traits that characterize it in modern form. Rejecting the sensationalism of Behn and other early popular novelists, novelists built on the realism of Bunyan's work. Three of the foremost novelists of this era are **Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Samuel Richardson**. Defoe's name, more than that of any other English writer, is credited with the emergence of the "true" English novel by virtue of the 1719 publication of *The Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. In the work of these three writers, the realism and drama of individual consciousness that we most associate with the novel took precedence over external drama and other motifs of continental romance. Contemporary critics approved of these elements as supposedly native to England in other genres, especially in history, biography, and religious prose works.

A number of profound social and economic changes affecting British culture from the Renaissance through the eighteenth century brought the novel quickly into popular prominence. The broadest of these were probably the advances in the technology of printing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which made written texts—once the province of the elite—available to a growing population of readers. Concurrent changes in modes of distribution and in literacy rates brought ever increasing numbers of books and pamphlets to populations traditionally excluded from all but the most rudimentary education, especially working-class men and women of all classes. As the circulation of printed material transformed, so did its economics, shifting away from the patronage system characteristic of the Renaissance, during which a nation's nobility supported authors whose works reinforced the values of the ruling classes. As the patronage system broke down through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, authors became free agents in the literary marketplace, dependent on popular sales for their success and sustenance, and thus reflecting more and more the values of a predominantly middle-class readership. The demand for reading material allowed a greatly expanded pool of writers to make a living from largely ephemeral poetry and fiction.

'*Robinson Crusoe*' (1719) by **Daniel Defoe** is the earliest English novel of incident. It was at once recognized in England and throughout literary Europe as something different from the picaresque story to which it is akin. '*Robinson Crusoe*' was an elaboration of a contemporary incident that made a fascinating appeal to the imagination. The aim of Defoe was to invest his narrative with a sense of reality; to this end he made use of every device at his command to deceive the reader. He took as a model for his narrative the form that best produces the illusion of truth—that of current memoirs with the accompaniment of a diary. He begins his story very modestly by briefly sketching the boyhood of a rogue who runs away to sea and thus gradually prepares the reader for those experiences which are to culminate in the shipwreck on the Island of Despair. When he gets his Crusoe there, he does not send him on a quest for exciting adventures, but surprises us by a matter-of-fact account of Crusoe's expedients for feeding and clothing himself and making himself comfortable. He brings the story home to the Englishmen of the middle-class by telling them that their condition in life is most conducive to happiness. And finally, '*Robinson Crusoe*' has its message. Undoubtedly its message is too apparent for the highest art, but it is a worthy one: *Be patient, be industrious, be honest, and you will at last be rewarded for your labour*. '*Robinson Crusoe*' must have seemed to the thousands of hard-laboring Englishmen a symbol of their own lives, their struggles, their failures. Thus, Defoe humanized adventure.

Therefore, the English novel has generally been seen as beginning with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722). Another important early novel is *Gulliver's Travels* (1726, amended 1735), by Irish writer and clergyman **Jonathan Swift**, which is both a satire of human nature, as well as a parody of travellers' tales like *Robinson Crusoe*. The rise of the novel as an important literary genre is generally associated with the growth of the middle class in England.

Other major 18th-century English novelists are **Samuel Richardson** (1689–1761), author of the epistolary novels *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747–48); **Henry Fielding** (1707–1754), who wrote *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749); **Laurence Sterne** (1713–1768), who published *Tristram Shandy* in parts between 1759 and 1767; **Oliver Goldsmith** (1728–1774), author of *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766).

A noteworthy aspect of both the 18th- and 19th- century novel is the way the novelist directly addressed the reader. For example, the author might interrupt his or her narrative to pass judgment on a character, or pity or praise another, and inform or remind the reader of some other relevant issue.

It was in the Victorian era (1837–1901), however, that the novel became the leading literary genre in English. Another important fact is the number of women novelists who were successful in the 19th century, even though they often had to use a masculine pseudonym. At the beginning of the 19th century most novels were published in three volumes. However, monthly serialization was revived with the publication of Charles Dickens' *Pickwick Papers* in twenty parts between April 1836 and November 1837. Both Dickens and Thackeray frequently published this way.

The 1830s and 1840s saw the rise of **social novel**, also known as social problem novel, that "arose out of the social and political upheavals which followed the Reform Act of 1832". This was in many ways a reaction to rapid industrialization, and the social, political and economic issues associated with it, and was a means of commenting on abuses of government and industry and the suffering of the poor, who were not profiting from England's economic prosperity. Stories of the working class poor were directed toward middle class to help create sympathy and promote change. An early example is Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1837–38).

**Charles Dickens** emerged on the literary scene in the 1830s with his all time classics like *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*. Dickens wrote vividly about London life and struggles of the poor, but in a good-humoured fashion, accessible to readers of all classes. One of his most popular works to this day is *A Christmas Carol* (1843). In more recent years Dickens has been most admired for his later novels, such as *Dombey and Son* (1846–48), *Great Expectations* (1860–61), *Bleak House* (1852–53) and *Little Dorrit* (1855–57) and *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65). An early rival to Dickens was **William Makepeace Thackeray**, who during the Victorian period ranked second only to him, but he is now much less read and is known almost exclusively for *Vanity Fair* (1847). In that novel he satirizes whole swaths of humanity while retaining a light touch. It features his most memorable character, the engagingly roguish Becky Sharp. The **Brontë sisters** were other significant novelists in the 1840s and 1850s. Their novels such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* caused a sensation when they were first published but were subsequently accepted as classics.

An interest in rural matters and the changing social and economic situation of the countryside is seen in the novels of **Thomas Hardy** (1840–1928). Like Charles Dickens he was also highly critical of much in Victorian society, though Hardy focussed more on a declining rural society. He gained fame as the author of such novels as, *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). In novels such as *The Mayor of Casterbridge* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* Hardy attempts to create modern works in the genre of tragedy, that are modelled on the Greek drama, especially Aeschylus and Sophocles, though in prose, not poetry, a novel not drama, and with characters of low social standing, not nobility. Another significant late 19th-century novelist is George Gissing (1857–1903) who published 23 novels between 1880 and 1903. His best known novel is *New Grub Street* (1891).

The major novelists writing in Britain at the start of the 20th century were an Irishman **James Joyce** (1882–1941) and two immigrants, American **Henry James** (1843–1916) and Pole **Joseph Conrad** (1857–1924). The modernist tradition in the novel begins with James and Conrad, in novels such as *The Golden Bowl* (1907), *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim* (1900). Other important early modernists were **Dorothy Richardson** (1873–1957), whose novel *Pointed Roof* (1915), is one of the earliest example of the stream of consciousness technique and **D. H. Lawrence** (1885–1930), who wrote with understanding about the social life of the lower and middle classes, and the personal life of those who could not adapt to the social norms of his time. *Sons and Lovers* (1913), is widely regarded as his earliest masterpiece. There followed *The Rainbow* (1915), though it was immediately seized by the police, and its sequel *Women in Love* published in 1920. Lawrence attempted to explore human emotions more deeply than his contemporaries and challenged the boundaries of the acceptable treatment of sexual issues, most notably in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, which was privately published in Florence in 1928. However, the unexpurgated version of this novel was not published until 1959. Then in 1922 Irishman **James Joyce's** important modernist novel *Ulysses* appeared. *Ulysses* has been called "a demonstration and summation of the entire movement". Set during one day in Dublin in June 1904, in it Joyce creates parallels with Homer's epic poem the Odyssey.

Another significant modernist in the 1920s was **Virginia Woolf** (1882–1941), who was an influential feminist and a major stylistic innovator associated with the stream-of-consciousness technique. Her novels include *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and *The Waves* (1931). Her essay collection *A Room of One's Own* (1929) contains her famous dictum; "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction".

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